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GIS

CSCE DIGEST

April 26, 1988

THE POLITICS OF POLLUTION IN THE SOVIET UNION AND EAST EUROPE

TWO YEARS AFTER CHERNOBYL

The following are excerpts from a Commission hearing that examined the political effects of pollution in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, particularly after Chernobyl:

Barbara Jancar

(Professor of Political Science, Staff University of New York)

In an overview of the environmental crisis confronting Eastern Europe, Dr. Jancar described the problems as immense:

"Environmental degradation has reached such proportions that it can no longer be hid from the public. Nowhere has the catastrophe been more obvious than in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Poland's rivers are among the most polluted in the world. Air pollution in and around the great mining areas near Krakow was termed by one Polish ecologist the worst in the world with the possible exception of that in the Donetsk Basin in the Soviet Union. During the brief period of Solidarity, reports circulated that typhus had become again a major public health problem in Warsaw. In Czechoslovakia, 30 percent of the forests in the Czech lands (Bohemia) are dead, and 20 percent more are dying. On both sides of the East German-Czech border, the bare trunks of trees march up naked hillsides devoid of undergrowth as if the victim of some enemy bombing attack. In Slovakia, half the rivers can no longer support life. The situation is not much better in the other East European countries. The GDR is Europe's worst polluter of the atmosphere, emitting some 5 million tons of sulfur dioxide into the air in 1982, about 150 percent more than does neighboring Czechoslovakia. Thirty percent of the Hungarian forests are also in the process of dying or already dead. Two-thirds of Hungarian drinking water reserves are endangered, and the country is further exposed to transboundary pollution of its waters which come from Romania. Romania is the fifth worst polluter of air in Europe, but because of its deciduous forest, only about 2 percent of its forests have been affected by acid deposition. As regards water pollution, only 20 percent of Romania's rivers are considered capable of providing potable water. One project which has aroused particular concern among Western environmentalists is Ceausescu's plan to turn the Danube Delta into a giant agrocomplex by 1990, thereby destroying an irreplaceable wildlife habitat and migrating bird flyway. Even Bulgaria, which has prided itself on its environmental policies, has recently admitted shortcomings in its handling of air and water pollution."

NOTICE

The quotes contained herein were taken from the transcript of the Commission hearing on April 26, 1988. They have been abridged by the Commission staff for purposes of clarity in this publication.

"thirty percent of the forests in Bohemia are dead, and 20 percent more are dying. In Slovakia, half of the rivers can no longer support life."

Dr. Jancar

John R. Lampe

(Secretary, The East European Program, The Wilson Center)

"on surveying the spectrum of East European countries. . . . I omit the DDR for lack of time and knowledge, and Romania because I find no willingness even to recognize the problems. In the others, one common feature has been the absence of a full-scale ministry for the environment, that is until Hungary established one this past January. But another is an expressed interest in greater knowledge of and cooperation with the American environmental establishment.

re: *Czechoslovakia*

"The small (550 employees) but supposedly prestigious State Committee on Science has designated one of its seven departments to deal with environmental protection. The department's 35 scientists are there on special assignment but work within a framework of bureaucratic control that gives large industrial polluters little cause for concern. This is as close as Czechoslovakia has come to an EPA, although plans for a separate agency have been formulated. At least the country's media are now more forthcoming about reporting environmental damage (e.g., all 250 oil spills in the Danube in 1986). The collection of technical data is reportedly good, although still closely held. Also, Czechoslovakia's formidable stock of frustrated human capital includes a large number of highly trained specialists in institutes and universities who have already done environmental research. Some of this cadre attended the workshop on agriculture and the environment jointly sponsored by our National Academy of Sciences and the Czech and Slovak counterparts in Ceske Budejovice in April 1987. I sat in and was impressed, as were a number of American scientists.

re: *Poland*

"As noted in the excellent RFE Background Report (no. 42, March 20, 1987) to which I referred the Commission, Poland's written regulations for environmental protection are the most detailed and stringent in Eastern Europe. They are, however, most frequently observed in their breach. One large aluminum plant was actually closed some ten years ago, because of dangerous fluoride emissions, and others have been forced to limit their emissions since then, but the initiatives came from unofficial, public pressure. The big metallurgical enterprises and power plants, the worst offenders, remain untouched by official admonitions, occasional modest fines, and even repeated public pressure. As a concession to that pressure,

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Lampe, *continued from page 1*

the government several years ago appointed a leading independent scientist to a ministerial position with some environmental authority. His presence proved ineffective, however, and he has since been replaced. The necessary restrictions on enterprise behavior remain expensive, and the shortage of new capital plus Soviet pressure for expanding the very metallurgical production which should be cut back do not promise rapid improvement, even if the present stalemate between state and society in Poland can be resolved.

re: *Hungary*

"The National Office for the Protection of Nature and the Environment in Budapest was the closest that any East European country had come to an EPA organization until the new Ministry was created on January 1, with water protection added. Although its budget and staff (now over 100) are small and the stiff fines that they can impose typically covered by state subsidies, the organization seems ably staffed from top to bottom. Its own publications and its collection of outside information are the most extensive in the region. Hungary's performance in appraising the environmental risks and high, presently unbudgeted protection costs to its already endangered water supply by the Gabcikovo-Nagymaros dam project on the Danube (jointly undertaken with Czechoslovakia and scheduled to begin operation in the early 1990s) has been impressive, although here a special inquiry by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and public pressure deserve the credit. In response to growing concern about the disposal of chemical waste, some of which has been imported from Western Europe in return for hard currency, the then Office and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences joined in holding a major international conference on hazardous waste in Budapest last fall.

re: *Bulgaria*

"The Bulgarian Government has displayed a growing awareness of environmental dangers over the past decade and has permitted more media coverage of damage done since the Chernobyl accident (about which the press, like Czechoslovakia's, said nothing for 5-6 days). A state commission on the environment exists, with minimal powers, as does the more broadly based but entirely powerless All National Commission for the Protection of the Environment. The major change in recent years has been the introduction of the subject into school curricula, along a pattern pioneered by the Soviet Union. Recent media attention to the serious impact on Ruse of chloride and sulfur pollution from a huge Romanian chemical plant across the Danube at Giurgiu neglected to note that in at least one demonstration in Ruse, the demonstrators were objecting to Bulgarian as well as Romanian pollution. The growing Bulgarian reliance on nuclear power (32 percent of 1986 electricity generation, scheduled to reach 50 percent before 2000) has caused enough public anxiety since Chernobyl to prompt publicized certification for the Kozloduy reactors as safe. Yet with hydroelectric power trimmed to 6 percent of total generation since the 1983-85 and 1987 droughts, and brown coal-burning stations clearly heavy polluters, many Bulgarians believe that here, with Soviet nuclear power reactors as with other Soviet connections, they have nowhere else to turn.

"The overriding problem facing environmental protection for all these countries is not the absence of appropriate legislation or even a powerful ministry. Nor, increasingly, is it the lack of accurate scientific data on the extent of the problem or public awareness that something more needs to be done very soon. It is rather that the apparatus of central planning and a command economy leaving the major polluters, the large state enterprises, free to draw on government subsidies to cover fines of any size without the fear of reduced profit margins that have made such penalties effective in the Western market economies."

Jancar

re: *unofficial environmental groups in Czechoslovakia*

"There have been several tantalizing developments in environmental activism in Czechoslovakia, whose people have long been faulted by their own scientists for lack of concern for the environment. The first is the ongoing involvement of Charter 77 in environmental issues. Among its more than 300 statements on human rights, the environment has figured prominently in many of them. After Chernobyl, the Charter responded to the authorities' handling of information about the accident with a letter to the Czechoslovak Government and National Assembly, demanding full publication of the facts. In its tenth anniversary statement, the Charter signers took on the role of national environmental conscience, calling on Czechs and Slovaks to bring discussion on the environment out into the public forum as an indication of their responsibility toward future generations. In April 1987, the Charter came out with its second full-length document on the environment, urging restructuring of the economy and the elevation of environmental protection to the government's first priority.

"Official reaction to the Bratislava report confirms that* glasnost *in Czechoslovakia has yet to exempt environmental activism from the charge of deviant behavior"

"The second is the emerging activism of the official environmental organizations, the Czech and Slovak Societies for the Defenders of Nature. In February of this year, the President and members of the Adirondack Mountain Club from upstate New York held a meeting with the President and Secretary General of the Czech Society of the Defenders of Nature. It is believed that this meeting was the first such encounter between a U.S. environmental group and an official organization in Czechoslovakia.

"Of special significance in developments in Czech domestic environmental politics has been a grass-roots protest from Northern Bohemia against environmental pollution in that area. The first of its kind in Czechoslovakia, it has had to be taken seriously as environmental conditions in that area have reached the 'ecological barrier,' or point of no return. In January and February of 1987, some 300 people from the Chomutov District (one of the ten districts in North Bohemian kraj), signed a letter sent first to the Chairman of the district local government, and then to the Czech Prime Minister and Praesidium of the Communist Party. It is not clear whether the letter only complained about an insufficient warning system to alert people to an increase in air pollution, or was a general complaint about air pollution in the district. The matter was taken up at the regional party conference in October. The party regional committee secretary referred to the petition and admitted that its criticism of the warning system was justified.

"An entirely different official reaction was given to the report released in June 1987 by a group of 100 experts associated with the official Slovak Society of the Defenders of Nature and the Countryside on pollution in the Slovak capital of Bratislava. Entitled *Bratislava nahlas* (Bratislava glasnost), the 73-page report systematically examines the ecological degradation in the city and the social and economic consequences that it has brought in its wake. Noting that Bratislava has the highest suicide rate in the country, the study faulted the decline in the city's quality of life. The report sharply criticized Bratislava's record in urban development planning and its neglect of cultural monuments, and opposed the proposed construction of a nuclear power plant. The response of the local authorities was to liken the report's call for a re-evaluation of Bratislava's situation to proposals for reform that were made in 1968 by 'self-appointed informal groups', obliquely accusing the authors of using an environmental issue to promote its own antistate agenda. Official reaction to the Bratislava report confirms that *glasnost* in Czechoslovakia has yet to exempt environmental activism from the charge of deviant behavior."

Witnesses Dr. Jancar (left), Dr. Charles Ziegler and Dr. John Lampe at the Commission's hearing on pollution and politics in Eastern Europe.
Photo by Fritz Myer

Charles E. Ziegler

(Professor of Political Science, University of Louisville)

re: *Soviet Environmental Protection under Gorbachev*

"The beginnings of Soviet environmental consciousness, in the modern sense of the word, date to the heated discussion over Lake Baikal in the mid-1960s. Since then, the most innovative and influential arguments for environmental protection have been voiced by social and natural scientists, most notably economists. The effective environmental measures enacted over the last two decades have been motivated largely by a recognition of the economic costs of pollution, rather than for esthetic, biological, or health-related reasons. Furthermore, the theoretical challenge of explaining why environmental degradation exists in socialist systems has forced a reevaluation of certain fundamental Marxian economic principles.

"In the brief period since Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary, the contours of Soviet environmental debate have shifted markedly. First, the party leadership has demonstrated a much more critical attitude toward expensive and environmentally questionable projects, such as the Siberian river diversion scheme. Second, there appears to be a greater awareness of the real economic costs for the national economy that result from waste of natural resources, and from the spinoff costs of pollution. Third, there is a greater willingness to acknowledge environmental disasters, and to reduce secrecy overall. Fourth, Gorbachev himself has emphasized environmental protection as one area of common interest that could draw nations together in a new international order. Fifth, as part of the general liberalization occurring in the Soviet Union, a number of miniscule, but vocal, environmental organizations have formed and are operating largely free from Communist Party control. Finally, the environmental debate within the USSR has increasingly been couched in nationalistic terms, both by the slim Russian majority and by several Soviet ethnic minorities.

re: *The nationalistic tone characterizing the environmental debates within the Soviet Union*

"The highly nationalistic and anti-Semitic Pamiat (Memory) and Otechestvo (Fatherland) are two groups that have a tangential interest in the environment. Their primary interest seems to be in protecting the historical and cultural legacy of *rodina*, the Motherland. These groups evolved in the early 1980s from societies for the preservation of historic monuments. Pamiat and Otechestvo are rumored to have high-level support from conservative elements in the party and state bureaucracy. These two organizations are examples of groups that have flourished under Gorbachev, but are opposed to essential elements of his programs.

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John M. Kramer

(Professor of Political Science, Mary Washington College)

re: *Chernobyl and the Nuclear "Debate" in Communist Europe: The Role of Public Opinion*

"The explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station on April 26, 1986 contaminated large areas of the environment with radioactive wastes in both Communist Europe and Western Europe. In Communist Europe, Chernobyl also precipitated highly visible protests against the development of nuclear power in the region and the overall reticence of Communist governments to provide full and prompt information about the accident and its consequences for the environment and health of the people.

"The emergence of a discernible antinuclear 'lobby' is of preeminent significance in Communist Europe where regimes typically have been intolerant of any manifestations (however incipient) of political pluralism and dissent. Indeed, critics charge that nondemocratic political practices are themselves factors that compromise nuclear safety and increase the risks of another Chernobyl. As a member of the Polish Academy of Sciences has forcefully argued, the 'great weakness' of nuclear safety measures in Poland 'is rooted in the extensive and long-standing practice of concealing and falsifying breakdowns and accidents as well as their circumstances and results.'

"Not surprisingly, the most widespread protests against nuclear power in Eastern Europe occurred in Poland—which suffered the highest levels of radioactive contamination among East European states, and where anti-Soviet sentiments are particularly strong. More than 2,000 people in Krakow, organized by the dissident pacifist group 'Freedom and Peace,' marched to the old royal castle carrying placards and chanting slogans including 'No Iodine from the U.S.S.R.' 'Thou Shalt Not Kill,' and (in reference to Poland's first nuclear power plant now under construction at Zarnowiec), 'Today Chernobyl, Tomorrow Zarnowiec.' Five Polish nuclear power experts published an open letter urging the government to reassess the safety features at Zarnowiec, which, they claimed, had 'raised doubts' among the population because many features of the plant were based upon untested Soviet prototypes. The Zarnowiec project also elicited a petition from some 3,000 residents of Bialystok in northern Poland demanding a halt in construction at Zarnowiec until the entire project could be placed under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency and assurances provided that the plant would use only the 'most sophisticated' safety systems. The petition further asserted that the official assurances about the safety of nuclear power were 'not credible.'

"In the German Democratic Republic, hundreds of people—doubtless well informed about the Chernobyl events by West German television—submitted to the Government on Environment Day a petition entitled 'Chernobyl Is Everywhere,' asserting that Chernobyl had caused 'insecurity and a feeling of being threatened.' The petition condemned the government's alleged reluctance to discuss openly the magnitude and consequences of the accident as 'irresponsible and socially dangerous,' and urged the authorities through a referendum (constitutionally permitted, though never before employed) to initiate a 'broad public discussion' about the future of nuclear power and, specifically, whether the GDR should completely abandon it by 1990.

"In Czechoslovakia, a Western source reported 'marked fear' and 'panic' after Chernobyl among citizens residing near Czechoslovakia's two nuclear power plants (located at Jaslovske Bohunice and Dukovany, respectively). *Rude pravo*, the official organ of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, implicitly confirmed this account when it reported that after Chernobyl 'many people' in Czechoslovakia asked whether the development of nuclear power 'cannot be slowed down or even stopped.' A new dissident group 'Antiatom' has emerged with the self-proclaimed goal 'to stop the atomic threat' in Czechoslovakia.

"Chernobyl even has stimulated public opposition to nuclear power in the Soviet Union. This is especially true in the Ukrainian SSR where the Chernobyl plant is located. There, a 'joint lobby,' as a Western source characterizes it, of prominent Ukrainian scientists and literary figures has lobbied vigorously to halt, or at least slow down, the ambitious program to develop nuclear power in the republic. (At present, five nuclear power stations, accounting for 40 percent of installed nuclear capacity in the USSR, operate in the republic, and four more stations currently are under construction.) *Literaturna Ukraina* recently (January 21, 1988) published a letter from 13 leading Ukrainian scientists that embodies many of the arguments of the opponents of nuclear power. The scientists chastise the USSR Ministry of Atomic Energy for a 'belligerent and bureaucratic' attitude that seeks only to expand the production of nuclear power, that ignores the 'bitter lessons of Chernobyl', that is indifferent to the valid concerns of the public regarding the safety and impact on the environment of nuclear power stations, and that typically locates these stations in densely populated urban areas.

"A POLISH SOURCE, REFLECTING PREVAILING OFFICIAL SENTIMENT, REMARKED THAT CHERNOBYL REPRESENTS 'A LESSON, NOT A VERDICT.'"

re: *Popular Opposition*

re: *The Official Response*

"Undoubtedly, antinuclear protesters face formidable—if not insurmountable—obstacles in achieving their goal of the complete abandonment of nuclear power. First, they operate in nondemocratic political systems that have the capacity to limit sharply their activities. Second, all regimes in the region have devoted so many resources to the development of nuclear power that they are unlikely (except perhaps in Poland) totally to abandon these efforts. Third, just as in democratic societies, there are in Communist Europe many ardent proponents of nuclear power who sincerely believe that the benefits to be derived from the atom far outweigh the risks.

"In general, Communist governments, while acknowledging the seriousness of the accident at Chernobyl and the need to draw appropriate lessons from it, reaffirm their commitment to nuclear power. A Polish source, reflecting prevailing official sentiment, remarked that Chernobyl represents 'a lesson, not a verdict.'

"Despite such assertions, there is evidence that Chernobyl and popular opposition to nuclear power have fostered, or reinforced, reservations about nuclear power among political elite throughout Communist Europe—although their precise impact on elite remain unclear given the secrecy (even in the era of *glasnost*) still surrounding decision making process in Communist polities.

"More broadly, all regimes in Communist Europe have affirmed an enhanced commitment to the safe operation of nuclear facilities. The USSR is spending as much as 5 million for additional safety systems on every reactor it has in operation. Henceforth, the USSR also will equip all reactors with steel containment vessels to control meltdowns. Perhaps most significantly, the USSR has announced that all new power blocks will be equipped with pressurized water reactors rather than graphite moderate reactors of the type installed at Chernobyl. Water pressurized reactors already are standard throughout Eastern Europe.

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"East European states have taken similar measures. Both Czechoslovakia and the GDR have announced that their new nuclear plants, at Temlin and Stendal, respectively, will be protected by containment vessels—the first such structures to be installed in these countries. Reportedly, in Bulgaria 'security systems' at the Kozloduy Nuclear Power Station 'have been tripled' since the accident at Chernobyl. Bulgarian officials stress that expansion of the Kozloduy plant is proceeding 'in cooperation with specialists of the International Atomic Energy Agency' and international standards are being 'fully met' therein. Finally, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the USSR have all invited teams from the International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect selected nuclear facilities and ensure their adherence to international standards of safety.

re: *Whither Nuclear Power?*

"In the polities of Communist Europe, Chernobyl stimulated a 'debate' among proponents and opponents about the future status of nuclear power in the region. The 'debate'—itself a highly unusual, if not unique, phenomenon in Communist polities where regimes typically tolerate little public opposition to official policy—has involved as participants both official elite and the citizenry at large.

"Our analysis suggests that popular antinuclear sentiment has exerted some influence on public policy. Regimes have sought to assuage popular fears about the dangers of nuclear power. Public opinion seemingly also has influenced the decision in Poland to halt construction temporarily at the Zarnowiec Nuclear Power Station.

"Ironically, even after Chernobyl—and the extensive contamination of the environment that ensued—concern for environmental quality may remain one of the strongest rationales for nuclear power in the region."

Kramer

"On the other hand, nuclear power will continue to be an important, albeit not the decisive, component of the energy balance in Communist Europe for the forseeable future. Ironically, even after Chernobyl—and the extensive contamination of the environment that ensued—concern for environmental quality may remain one of the strongest rationales for nuclear power in the region."

Dr. Kramer testifying on public opinion in Eastern Europe—*photo by Fritz Myer*

Ziegler *continued from p. 3*

"... In turn, certain of the non-Russian nationalities resent what they perceive as Russian insensitivity to the environmental destruction of their republics. Central Asians have complained, for example, that the writers so eager to defend Siberia's natural wealth care little about the low socio-economic development of the Central Asian Republics. Citizens of the Baltic Republics have been particularly concerned about the location of nuclear energy plants in or near their territory, and resent the rumored presence of a nuclear waste dump at Paldiski, near Tallinn, Estonia. Georgian intellectuals are opposed to construction of the Caucasus Mountain Railway, a 188 kilometer, twin-track line running from Ordzhonikidze to Ksani. The rail line, it is argued, will damage Georgian forests, archeological sites and historical monuments, and will necessitate a large influx of non-Georgian (that is, mostly Russian) labor into the republic.

re: *The Changing Context of Environmental Protection*

"Important changes are occurring in Soviet environmental protection under Gorbachev. While the *focus* of environmental efforts has not shifted perceptibly (water protection remains the single most important general issue), the *process* by which these issues are addressed has changed markedly. First, in keeping with the new policy of *glasnost*, the environmental questions are being debated more openly and honestly than at any time since the initial furor over Lake Baikal. Secondly, the participation of non-specialists in these debates, particularly literary figures, has become routine. Moreover, Soviet writers almost invariably adopt environmentalist positions, and they are not reluctant to couch their criticisms of developers in highly emotional terms. One of the most significant aspects of such emotive appeals is the nationalistic tone that has characterized recent debates. This nationalism is frequently Rus-

"In responding to Armenian protests over ecological issues, the party inadvertently encouraged them to broaden their demands to include the territorial issue of Nagorno-Karabakh."

"The most significant manifestation of ethnic tensions in the recent years, the February-March 1988 dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region in Azergaidzhan, was linked to Armenian ecological protests. A group of Armenian intellectuals sent an open letter to Gorbachev in March 1986 complaining about pollution from chemical plants and the radiation leaks from the Medzamor nuclear power station, and demanding immediate action to address the severe health problems affecting the republic's population. Shortly thereafter an Armenian journalist published an article in the central press detailing the ecological horrors visited on Erevan by the chemical industry. The postwar general plan for the city envisioned the relocation of 76 enterprises outside city limits. Not only did the authorities fail to move a single enterprise—they constructed 54 new factories! The situation was exacerbated by Erevan's population growth, from 450,000 in 1947 to 1.2 million today. Chemical smog, the author charges, has resulted in untold birth defects, high levels of infant mortality and morbidity, and increased sterility. Erevan's air pollution problem, the dropping level of Lake Sevan and its pollution from agricultural runoff, and public discontent over the Medzamor nuclear plant and hydroelectric power stations in the republic precipitated demonstrations late in 1987. In responding to Armenian protests over ecological issues, the party inadvertently encouraged them to broaden their demands to include the territorial issue of Nagorno-Karabakh."

sian (as in the river diversion debate), but links between ecological concern and ethnic sentiment are evident in other republics as well.

"Officially, the highest levels of party and government seem to be more willing to respond to environmental crises than at any time in the past. Despite considerable disagreement on many of Gorbachev's reform initiatives, the Soviet leadership appears to be in basic accord on the need to reduce costs resulting from environmental degradation. Soviet economists for the past two decades have urged greater reliance on economic mechanisms in order to reduce the excessive waste of natural resources. Moreover, they have convincingly demonstrated the social and economic costs of unrestrained pollution. These arguments have made an impression on the party leadership under conditions of *perestroika*. At a January 1988 meeting, the Politburo announced a planned shift from administrative to primarily economic methods in environmental protection over the next few years.

"Recent attempts to reorganize the Soviet bureaucracy may also benefit the environment. The Party Central Committee and the USSR Council of Ministers created a State Committee for the Protection of Nature (Goskompriroda) in early 1988. This new agency is supposed to centralize and modernize environmental administration and regulate the use of natural resources, a development advocated for years by Soviet environmentalists."

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